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III.—THE DINNER TOTER

BY CHARLES L. COON,
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St. Paul very likely had some acquaintance with that class of men who hire out their children for wages and do nothing themselves, when he spoke of the man who provided not for his own household, who had denied the faith, and who was worse than an infidel.

Some of my mill-owner friends tell me that "dinner toters," like poor Indians, have disappeared from their mill villages. It happens that I have been unable to find or hear of a mill village in North Carolina where some of these vampires do not thrive rather openly and unblushingly, if we are to believe the evidence of disinterested witnesses.

Every industry which employs young children for wages will breed "dinner toters." Even "the widow women who are dependent on their children for support and the crippled man who is unable to support his family," to use the lingo of the apologists for child labor, are only testimonies to a condition and a sentiment which makes possible this "dinner toter" class, which toils not, neither does it spin.

But I shall not discuss this question in the abstract. I want to describe the conditions in one typical mill village in North Carolina. I do it in the language of a mill hand, who, under date of February 17, 1911, writes:

Mr. Charles L. Coon, Wilson, N. C.:

DEAR SIR: There are 300 operatives working in the mill at this place and about 90 families represented. These figures are not guaranteed, but are as near as I can get without making a complete canvass.

You ask about certain men who work their children in the mills and do nothing themselves. Will say that I have found men of this type at every mill village I ever worked at, and at present there are some to be found here at this little mill village.

Case 1 is that of a man, stout and able-bodied, whom I have known for about ten years, and if he ever did a day's manual labor I have never heard of it. At the time I first knew him he had one boy and one girl, both very small, working in this mill, and one little girl that was about five years old. This was about nine or ten years ago. He worked them in the mill and never a day did he send them to school. The boy left home about five years ago. The girl turned out to be a prostitute and was living that life last account I had. The other child was put to work at almost babyhood and to-day is working in this mill. She has never gone to school and can not read nor write. I suppose she is about fifteen years old now. This man has acquired some property from the wages of his children.

Case 2 does little or no work; has one child at work in the mill; has little or no other visible means of support.

Case 3 is a man who, it is reported, works very little, if any. He does not stay with his family regularly; stays in Danville, where he can get booze. Some of his children are very small and would not be allowed in the mills at Danville. So he lets his family stay in North Carolina, where the children can work. He stays in Danville, where he can get short hours, when he does work, and drink booze. I am not acquainted with this party. These reports are only hearsay. I do know he has some small children working in this mill.

Yours respectfully,

Two days later the author of the above wrote me again, as follows:

Mr. Charles L. Coon, Wilson, N. C.:

DEAR SIR: I find that out of about ninety families that are represented at this mill, one-third have children at work. Of this number I find four widows with no other means of support to speak of but the children's wages. There are also one crippled man and one old man who are not able to make a support. Of course, there may be others that I have overlooked, but these figures are as near correct as I can get without making a complete canvass to get the accurate numbers. The Battle Bill (A measure then before the North Carolina Legislature.—Ed.) might work some hardship on the above six families. All the others have able-bodied fathers who help support their families and would not be hurt by the fourteen-year limit, except, of course, the few that do little or nothing toward the support of their families.

There are two more cases of that class worthy of notice that I failed to give you in my last letter. One is that of a man, although he works very regularly at times, he is a drunkard and a gambler, and has some very small children at work that should be in school. The other is a man who has raised a large family in total ignorance. Some of the children are ruined physically and mentally, for no other reason known but continuous labor and confinement in the mill since almost babyhood. The youngest boy is now thirteen or fourteen years old, and the way that child's life has been sapped

and his body stunted and dwarfed is a pitiable sight to behold. This case is largely commented on by those acquainted with it.

Pen cannot describe the ignorance and misery and immorality caused by this infant labor. One has to live among it and see it and its results to fully believe that such conditions really exist where schools are so plentiful.

Yours respectfully,

I want to picture to you another "dinner totter" case which recently came under my own observation. This man is the son of a substantial farmer, a landowner. He inherited a small farm, and obtained some education while a boy. When he grew up, he was able to get a public school teacher's certificate. He taught school for a few years, and married a good woman, who added some more land to the paternal estate. Five children were born to them. Then the family moved to a village where liquor was sold. The wife died. The man learned to drink too much, and soon after the death of his wife he married again. Then the land was sold and the family moved to its present home in a large town. The money obtained from the sale of the land was soon dissipated and the three older children were put to work in a knitting mill—one girl and two boys. The father did practically nothing, while he drew the wages of the three older children and failed to send his two younger children to school, though urged to do so. So notorious did this case become that the city attorney sent for this man and told him he must give the children their wages or he would have him prosecuted. There was no law in North Carolina to force this man to loosen his grip on these children, or their wages, but the threat succeeded. The children were permitted to draw their wages—whether they were permitted to use them as they saw proper I could not learn. Last November the two younger children, by aid of some teachers and other big-hearted people, were clothed and put to school. The seventeen-year-old girl secured work in another town and left home. She has had only about four grades in the public schools and will have a hard time winning her way. Her two brothers, of thirteen and fifteen, are yet in the mill. Their wages are still the only visible support of the family. The thirteen-year-old boy cannot read or write, while the fifteen-year-old boy can barely do so.

But there is another chapter. After the last Christmas holidays the two little boys who were put in school last fall were again taken out. When the sister learned this she came back home and

succeeded in finding homes for the two boys among relatives in the country.

Here is another example, in the language of a North Carolina superintendent of schools: "There were three children of school age in the family—the oldest, fifteen, could barely read. I went to see them to get them in school. They finally came, and we gathered up some books for them. When they had been there about a month I was besieged by the father to sign a certificate of attendance so they could go to work. They had not been in school the required time; but they quit school anyway and went to work."

This same superintendent tells of another case, as follows: "Another fellow had three children in school. One boy was especially bright. The father did nothing. This boy quit school in February. We all went after him, but it did no good. He had to work. Last fall they had the father in jail, and we had good attendance from one of his children."

Here is evidence from three cotton mill towns in different parts of North Carolina that this "dinner totter" class exists at the present day, in all its worst forms.

A Former Mill-Boy's Story

Of course, it may be argued that the cases cited are exceptional. In a way that is true. But to say that cotton mill children are better off in the mills than on the farms, that the mill owners are all humane men, that they do much welfare work, and the like, is also no true picture of real conditions. The other day I received a letter from a young man now attending a North Carolina college. Six years ago he was working in a mill. Of this child labor phase of the factory problem he says:

The most of my childhood days were spent within the walls of a cotton mill *prison*. In many ways I look upon those days with horror, and realize a loss that all the powers in the world can never regain. I know the mill life in and out, day and night. I worked two or three years at night, during my boyhood days. God save our boys and girls from what I experienced there.

I consider it a crime against humanity to allow women or children under sixteen to work at night. I don't see how any one could consider it wise to put the age limit for children under fourteen. To say the least, to put it under fourteen greatly endangers the child's life—morally, physically and mentally.

Effect on Character

And in order to develop our cotton industry, we hear men on every side defend child labor which breeds the "dinner totter," and makes of him a more despicable character than any slave-driver who ever disgraced our older civilization.

Only recently I had dinned in my ears that a bill which would prevent children under fourteen from work in a factory was a bill to promote idleness. The man who said that, and those who applauded him, boast of their humanity, and most of them claim to be followers of Him who said that He came that people might enjoy a more abundant life here in this world. There is no defense for child labor in factories; it is the most indefensible thing we have ever tolerated since we sold human beings as cattle. But couple with it this "dinner totter" product and all its attendant evils and you have something which no civilized country can afford long to tolerate.

I have often charged that child labor breeds immorality. I want to quote from a letter, dated last week, and written by a school superintendent who has had much to do with this problem. He says: "I am satisfied that working a child under fourteen injures the child's chances in life very materially. In the factories they are associated with older children. To my mind that gives them a desire to adopt certain vices which are always bad; but at that time of life are absolutely ruinous. It often undermines the health of the child. It blunts his moral sense. I have had to do with a lot of these children. Their moral sense seemed badly wrong. They have but little regard even for the decent relations of the sexes, and only slight ability to see the point in many a question of right and wrong. I do not mean that all were that way. I have found many children that were clean lived. I mean to say that the tendency seemed to be in that direction in many cases. I attributed it not so much to the work itself as to the association of the smaller children with the larger ones."

I am convinced that sooner or later we shall deal with this whole problem of child labor in a more radical way than we have ever yet dealt with it. We must do this in the interest of the child, in the interest of the human stock, and in the interest of sound morals.